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AUTHOR Wajeeh, Emad M.; Micceri, Ted
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ABSTRACT

This study examined differences in ratings between students in a metropolitan university system and traditional university freshmen on a set of factors that influence college choice. Data in regard to factors influencing college choice was collected from a sample of 1,795 University of South Florida (USF) freshmen and 1,108 USF students at various levels, and compared to similar data from 210,739 freshmen entering 431 institutions in 1991-92 who responded to the annual survey of college freshmen conducted by the American Council of Education and the Higher Education Research Institute. It was found that while the same factors were important and had an influence on college choice among all three groups, academic reputation was ranked higher (first) by traditional university freshmen compared to USF freshmen (who ranked it fifth) and USF students overall (who ranked it sixth). It was also found that while traditional university freshmen rated "graduates get good jobs" highly (second), USF students overall rated it much lower (thirteenth). Among USF students, the academic reputation of an institution was perceived by the majority as being based on the use of cutting edge technology, using technology in the classrooms, and having a quality library on campus. (Contains 15 references.) (MDM)

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Division of Budget, Human Resources, and Information Technology

Factors Influencing Students' College Choice at Traditional and Metropolitan Universities

Emad M. Wajeeh & Ted Micceri

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Office of Institutional Research and Planning
SVC 5022Tampa, Florida 33620
Telephone: (813) 974-5612
E-mail: Ewajeeh@admin.usf.edu

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Factors Influencing Students' College Choice at Traditional and Metropolitan Universities

Introduction

State legislators and higher education policy makers across the nation often complain of "Why those kids do not finish college in four years like I did thirty years ago?" And since we are obsessed by the No.1 Complex, institutions across the nation are being compared on the basis of a set of **traditional** factors to determine the **Best College** with no distinction being made between institution such as Cornell University in Ithaca, upstate New York and the University of Texas at El Paso, Texas. Yes Sir, one size fits all! The traditional criteria of these comparisons include but not limited to acceptance rates, graduation rates, retention rates, academic reputation rates (whatever it means), and expenditures per student. Accordingly, some universities are rewarded generously by high ranks in Tier One or Tier Two, while others are penalized and punished by a low rank and a place in Tier Four.

Many of the penalized institutions are metropolitan universities, whose missions are purposefully different from those of traditional universities. Typically, the mission of a metropolitan university calls for providing access, quality, and affordable education to all citizens in their region including working, underrepresented, disadvantaged, and nontraditional students. These universities usually focus on responding to the needs of their communities through training, research, and by forming partnerships with local businesses. Often, these types of universities serve as agents of societal change in their metropolitan areas.

The college choice is a decision influenced by a number of demographic, economic, social, political, and institutional factors. Different types of students chose to attend certain universities on the basis of one or more factors that link directly to their characteristics and needs. Major factors cited in the literature to influence college choice are: the advice of parents, academic reputation of the institution, availability of the desired program, availability of financial aid, cost of attending the institution, and the location of the institution. However, the relative importance of these factors are largely determined by the characteristics of the student and the types of the university (metropolitan or traditional). Therefore this study attempts to:

(a) compare the typical characteristics of traditional and metropolitan universities

(b) investigate differences in the ratings of a set of college choice factors between Traditional University Freshmen (TUF), Metropolitan University Freshmen (MUF), and Total Metropolitan University (MU-Tot) students

(c) given the fact that the academic reputation of an institution is rated as the top factor influencing college choice, the study will examine students perceptions of what "Academic Reputation" means.

USF as a Metropolitan University

The University of South Florida (USF) is a public comprehensive research institution. USF is part of the Florida State University System (SUS) which mainly serves the rapidly-growing Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) of Southwest Florida (population as of 1990 2,067,959).

The USF's mission statement places particular emphasis on teaching, research, and public service. The value statements of the University stress the importance of contributing to the greater understanding and resolution of societal problems and on human diversity, pluralism and community. The vision statement reflects on its community service function:

"We will be the first choice of public and private enterprises seeking to establish significant partnerships that will create benefits for the citizens of Florida and the nation." (USF Vision statement, 1994).

USF enrolled 34,550 students during Fall 1996 in 79 undergraduate disciplines, 86 master specialist programs, and 24 doctoral programs, including MD. The University includes nine colleges, is located on five separate campuses, and numbers a faculty of over 2,000 members. Entering freshmen boast an average SAT of 1,020 and a grade point average of approximately 3.25. Entering freshmen make up 35%, transfers from the regions' community colleges make up 45%, and transfers from other baccalaureate institutions make up 19% of new degree seeking enrollment each year. Females make up 59% of students, minorities 18%, the median age is 25 years, 19% are married, 49% enroll part-time, 73% work full-time or part-time, 91% live off-campus, and 93% are Florida residents.

The University of South Florida appears to be a typical metropolitan university distinguished by the following characteristics (also see Table 1):

- **USF is Located** in the City of Tampa, an urban center with a population of more than 2 million.
- **USF's mission statement** includes teaching, research, and public service. There is an explicit reference to serve local communities.
- **USF is oriented and identified with its regions** and its programs respond to regional needs while striving for national excellence.
- **USF is dedicated to serve as intellectual and creative resources** to the metropolitan regions in order to contribute to their economic development, social health, and cultural validity, through education, research, and professional outreach.
- **USF offers both graduate and undergraduate** education in the liberal arts and professional fields with strong practice-oriented and make extensive use of clinical, academic, and educational sites in the metropolitan area.
- **The majority of students** come from the metropolitan regions, many enroll as part-timers, non-degree seekers, or take evening only classes.
- **The student body is diverse** in racial and ethnic make up, socioeconomic background, and age, reflecting the demographic characteristics of the regions.
- **Transfer students** from local community colleges and other baccalaureate institutions make up the largest source of new enrollment.
- **The majority of its students are employed** full-time or part-time, on and off-campus.
- The vast majority of its students are **self-supporting and live in off-campus housing.**
- **The majority of its students require more than the traditional time to graduate**, for financial, work, and family reasons.

- Through providing **accessible, affordable, and quality education** to local citizens, USF shapes its structure, policies, and practices to enhance its effectiveness as the key agent of change in the metropolitan regions

Table 1
The Characteristics of Metropolitan Universities and Traditional Universities

Characteristics	Traditional University	Metropolitan University
Mission Statement	Mission statements does not refer to the institution as metropolitan.	The mission statement make explicit reference to its metropolitan role.
Public/Private	Mostly private institutions.	Mostly public institutions.
Community Outreach Programs	University leadership puts less emphasis on relationship with local community.	University leadership puts more emphasis on local community relationship/partnership efforts.
Admission Standards	More selective, accept score higher than 1000 on SAT, higher than 22 on ACT, and GPA of 3.0 and above.	Less selective, accept less than SAT score of 1000, ACT score of 22, and GPA of less than 3.0.
Admission Policy	Accepts less than 60% of applications.	Accepts 70% or more of application.
Location	Mostly located outside major city centers or urban MSA with populations below 150,000.	Located in a major city center/urban MSA with population of 250,000 or more. Contiguous counties have close social and economic ties with this center.
Enrollment Status	A high percentage of students are from outside the region/state. The vast majority (85% and above) are full-time students, and almost all students enroll as degree seeking.	The vast majority (90%) of its students are from the metropolitan regions. Many are part-time students (35% & above). Although most students are in degree programs, a large portion enroll as non-degree seeking.
FTIC & Transfer students	First time, in college freshmen make up the main source of the new enrollment.	Transfer students from neighboring community colleges and baccalaureate institutions make up a major source of new enrollment.
Student's Age	Median age is 19-22 years.	Median age is 24-26 years.
Student Housing	Mostly residential, 50% or more living on-campus. Almost all have dorms.	The majority of students (80% & above) commute to the institution. Many have no dorms.
Graduation Rates	Higher four-year graduation rate (more than 20%) and six-year graduation rate (50% and above).	Lower four-year graduation rate (20% or less) and six-year graduation rates (50% or less).
Retention Rates	Higher fall to fall student retention rates (above 80%).	Lower fall to fall student retention rates (less than 80%).
Minority Students	Lower percentage of minority student (15% or less).	Higher percentage of minority students (15% and above)
Working Students	Only small percent of students work part-time or full-time during academic year.	High percent of students work full-time (27%) and part-time (46%) during academic year.
Marital Status	The vast majority are single (95%).	Many (20%) of the students are married.
Financial Status of Students	Mostly fully or partially family-supported.	Mostly self-supported, pay their tuition by working or borrowing.

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Methods

Samples

The Sample of the Traditional University Freshmen (TUF) consisted of 210,739 freshmen entering 431 institutions in 1991-92 who responded to the annual survey of American College Freshmen conducted by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA. This survey has been conducted each year since 1966 and provides a rich source of information about freshmen and the factors affecting their college choice.

The sample of the Metropolitan University Freshmen (MUF) consisted of 1,795 USF prospective students responded (89.3% response rate) to a Freshmen Profile Survey (Takalkar & Micceri, 1992) who were attending group orientation sessions on USF's Tampa Campus.

The sample of Total Metropolitan University students (MU-Tot) consisted of 1,108 students from USF campuses (Tampa, 834; St. Petersburg 181; Sarasota, 93) who responded to Factors Affecting Student Enrollment at USF Survey in the Spring of 1996 (Wajeeh & Micceri, 1996). Every major college and every student level (Freshmen 8.4%, Sophomore 6.9%, Junior 30.8%, and senior 42.9%). was represented in the sample. The obtained multi-stage sample appears to well represent USF's undergraduate students population, with sample percentages for demographic factors never differing from population percentages by more than 5% and sometimes being identical.

Questionnaires

The data for this study were included selected items from (1) the ACE-HERI Annual Freshmen Survey which consists of items about reasons of selecting a college attended, (2) USF Freshmen Profile Survey which consists of items required freshmen to rate the influence of these factors on their decision of college selection, and (3) the Survey of Factors Affecting Students Enrollment at USF.

Analysis

The focus of this study was to identify differences in ratings between metropolitan students (freshmen and overall) and traditional university freshmen on a set of factors which are known to influence college choice.

Similar college choice items from the three surveys for TUF, MUF, and MU-Tot were identified and ranked on the basis of the percentages of students who rated them as having very important/very positive influence on their decisions to chose and later attended colleges.

Results

Table 2 presents ranks of variables rated as having very important or very positive influence on students decision to choose and later attend a college by the three groups: TUF, MUF, and MU-Tot students.

Table 2
Reasons Noted as Having Very Important/Positive Influence on the Decision of College Choice by Traditional and Metropolitan Universities Students

Institutional Factor	Traditional University Freshmen (TUF)	Metropolitan University Freshmen (MUF)	Metropolitan University Total (MU-Tot)
	Rank	Rank	Rank
Good Academic Reputation of Univ.	1	5	6
Graduates Get Good Jobs	2	NA	13
Size of College/Campus	3	14	11
Offered Financial Assistance	4	6	10
Low Tuition/Cost	5	2	3
Graduates go to Top Grad. Schools	6	NA	NA
Availability of the of the desired Major	7	1	2
Wanted to be Near Home	8	4	1
Good Social Reputation	9	8	22
Friend suggested attending	10	13	14
Relatives wanted me to come	11	10	NA
HS Counselor Advise	12	15	NA
Racial Harmony	13	16	19
Geographical Location of campus	NA	3	4
Quality/ Attitude of Faculty	NA	7	7
Opportunity for part-time work	NA	9	24
Quality of Academic facilities	NA	NA	8
Extra Curricula Activities	NA	11	21
Types of Housing Available	NA	12	27
Wide Choice of Majors	NA	NA	5

"Good Academic Reputation" is ranked as the 1st factor influencing college choice by TUF. However, MUF and MU-Tot students ranked this factor respectively as the 5th and the 6th most important factor. These ranks clearly indicate that this factor has great influence on all types of students. However, its relative influence is less on MUF and MU-Tot students than on TUF students.

"Graduates get Good Jobs" is rated as the 2nd highest in its influence on TUF. However, this factor has much less influence on the MU-Tot students decision (ranked 13th), perhaps because many of these students in this group are already employed. The MU-Tot attend school mainly for skills enhancement and job promotion purposes.

"Size of College/Campus" is ranked 3rd in term of its influence on the decision on TUF, but this factor has very little influence on MUF (ranked 14th) and MU-Tot (ranked 12th) students. Traditional freshmen appear to prefer large campuses and colleges.

"Offers Financial Assistance" is an important factor for both the TUF (ranked 4th) and the MUF (ranked 6th). But this factor is of a much lesser influence on MU-Tot students (ranked 11th) perhaps because most members of this group have jobs or are part-time and may not be eligible for financial aid. The relative importance of this factor and its influence on college decision will increase as the college tuition increases. Astin *et al* (1994, P.2) indicated that between 1989 and 1994, the greatest growth in the importance of a financial aid offer in the college choice decision was for freshmen from families with parental incomes above $80,000 per year.

"Low Tuition/Cost" is of a great influence on college choice for all three types of students. It was ranked as the 5th by TUF, the 2nd by the MUF, and 3rd by MU-Tot students. With rising college costs, financial assistance will have greater influence on college choice.

> *As the costs of higher education have been shifted from taxpayers to students since 1980, the proportion of college freshmen citing financial factors as very important in their college choice has increased sharply. To some degree, these growing financial considerations in college choice appear to be displacing considerations of academic reputation and preparation for good jobs that have dominated college choice considerations in the past. (Astin et. Al. 1994, P.2)*

"Wanted to be Near Home" is ranked the 1st in its influence on college choice by MU-Tot students, 4th by MUF, and 8th by TUF. Wajeeh and Micceri, 1996 found that over 62% of the metropolitan university students indicate that the desire to study near home/residence was the highest ranked factor influencing their college choice. The location of the campus near residence and place of work made it possible for older, married, and working students who have triple responsibility (i.e., family, job, and study) to attend and complete a degree at metropolitan universities. Probably, without the closeness of the campus to home and work place, many metropolitan students may not attend USF. In a similar study on a smaller metropolitan university (University of South Carolina-Spartanburg), Wajeeh, 1993 found the factor "Distance of Campus from Residence" have the greatest influence on college choice decision. These results were substantiated by responses to an open-ended question. A high proportion of respondents indicated that closeness to home and workplace is the major reason for choosing, attending, and completing a degree at that college . The rank difference between metropolitan freshmen and traditional freshmen indicate that MUF is distinctly different from TUF in as far as the impact of college location on their college choice decision.

"Good Social Reputation" is of importance to TUF (ranked 9th) and MUF (ranked 8th), but of almost no importance to MU-Tot students (ranked 22nd). Generally, older, nontraditional, and working metropolitan students do not spend extra time on campus to participate in social activities and programs.

"Availability of the desired Major/Program" is ranked as 1st influencing factor on MUF, as the 2nd influential factor on MU-Tot, and as the 7th. most Influential factor on TUF. This factor was found to be among the top five highly rated factors influencing college choice on all types of students (Chapman, 1981, Discenza et al., 1985; Hossler, 1985; Hossler & Gallager, 1987; Jackson & Chapman, 1984; Murphy, 1981; Nelson & Poremba, 1980; Spies, 178). This factor is also reported in open ended responses as having the second highest influence on college decision after the factor "closeness to home/work" (Wajeeh & Micceri, 1996).

"Opportunity for Part-Time Work" is more important to the MUF (ranked 9th) than for the MU-Tot students (ranked 24th). Older, non-traditional students are more likely to be employed full-time. At USF, 27% of the students work full-time and 46% work part-time. Close to 1/3rd of USF students indicated that their families are the major source of funding their education (Wajeeh & Meciri, 1996).

Other Factors such as availability of housing, extra curricula activities, racial harmony, positive attitudes of faculty, geographical location, and a friend who suggested attending are generally found more important on the decisions of freshmen than for the MU-Tot students.

Student Perceptions of a University's Academic Reputation

Because academic reputation variables dominate the enrollment and retention literature, it is of special theoretical interest to examine a student's perception of what most influences a university's academic reputation. The academic reputation factor has been cited by various college choice studies (Astin, A. W.S., Sax, L.J., and Mahoney, K.M. 1994, Wajeeh, E,. 1993) as among the most influential institutional factors in the college choice decision.

In this research we created a set of eleven closed-ended and two open-ended items seeking to determine what factors students perceive to most influence university's academic reputation. Content analysis of open-ended responses found no consistent factors, indicating that the eleven closed-ended items include the factors that most students consider important. Table 3 presents students' ratings of those eleven factors, ranked from most to least influential.

- Cutting edge technology and the widespread use of educational technology were the two top ranked factors influencing these students' perception of a university's academic reputation. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of the students indicate that cutting edge technology has either a high (47%) or moderate (30%) influence on a university's academic reputation. The widespread use of educational technology was reported by 74% of the students as having either a high (42%) or moderate (32%) influence.
- A quality library was the third highest factor influencing a university's academic reputation and was rated by 71% of the students as having either high influence(34%) or moderate influence (37%).
- Published rating in reports such as News Week and U.S. News and World Reports, Money Magazine, etc. ranked fourth, with 69% of the students rating this factor as having either high (34%) or moderate (35%) influence.

The quality and quantity of research, and high admission standards (SAT/ACT, GPA) were rated respectively by 64% and 50% as having either a high or moderate influence. No other factor was rated by more than 50% of the students as having either a high or moderate influence on a university's academic reputation.

These results suggest that for metropolitan university students, academic reputation is directly linked to students needs and not to some of the factors on which academe traditionally puts a great emphasis. While universities vie to attract "Star Faculty" and research funding, these data suggest that metropolitan institutions need to allocate more resources to meet student needs, such as libraries and technology.

Table 3
Student Ratings of Factors Influencing a University Academic Reputation

Degree of Influence	High		Moderate		Some		Low		None		High + Moderate	
Factors	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**%**	**Rank**
Cutting Edge Technology	476	47	308	30	122	12	34	3	70	7	77	1
Use of Educational Technology	424	42	320	32	151	15	30	3	79	8	74	2
A Quality Library	349	34	371	37	167	16	61	6	66	6	71	3
High Published Ratings	343	34	356	35	158	16	55	6	97	10	69	4
Quantity/Quality Research	267	27	372	37	215	21	53	5	98	10	64	5
High Admission Standards	245	24	343	34	262	26	73	7	89	9	58	6
Good Social Environment	196	19	312	31	233	23	114	11	158	16	50	7
High Media Visibility	191	19	303	30	233	23	122	12	158	16	49	8
Good Cultural Activities	158	16	309	31	261	26	120	12	161	16	47	9
Successful Athletic Programs	234	23	233	23	183	18	166	16	191	19	46	10
Famous or "Star" Faculty	140	14	266	26	246	24	138	14	219	22	40	11

*Source of data: Wajeeh and Micceri: Factor Affecting Students Enrollment at USF, 1996.

Summary and Conclusions

Institutions of higher education, and more specifically enrollment planning and management officers are concerned with institutional factors which affect students' college choice decisions. The recruitment of new students and the retention of the currently enrolled students is becoming a top priority matter on all campuses. Magazines such as the US News and World Report, Money Magazine, etc., compare and rank traditional and metropolitan universities on the basis of a set of traditional factors better suited to traditional universities. State legislators are concerned with retention and graduation rates and they also compare metropolitan and traditional universities using measures better suited to traditional universities. Therefore, there is a pressing need to make a distinction between the characteristics of traditional and metropolitan universities and to investigate the relative importance of factors influencing college choice in each of the two types of institutions.

Metropolitan universities are distinguished from traditional universities by location, mission, providing wider access to its diverse metropolitan population. Almost all of its students are from the region, older, close to one third are enrolled part-time, many are married, work part or full- time, a high percentage are minorities, many commute to the campus, and transfers from neighboring community colleges make up the major source of its new students. The four-year, six-year graduation rates, and fall to fall retention rates of metropolitan university students are lower than those of traditional university students.

Although, the same factors are important and have influence on college choice across the three groups, the relative influence of each one varies for different groups. Academic reputation for example is of a greater influence on TUF (ranked 1st) and of lesser influence on MUF (ranked 5th) and MU-Tot (ranked 6th). Traditional University Freshmen consider the factor "graduates get good jobs" as the second most influential factor, the MU-Tot rated it much lower (ranked 13th). The "size of college/campus" has an important influence on TUF (ranked 3rd), but MUF (ranked 14th) and MU-Tot (ranked 11th) find this factor of much less influence. The availability of financial aid is of importance to the TUF (ranked 4th) and to MUF (ranked 6th), but of lesser importance to MU-Tot (ranked 10th). The cost of attending the university is rated highly by all three groups: 5th by TUF, 2nd by MUF, and 3rd by MU-Tot. The availability of the desired major is of great influence on MUF (ranked 1st) and MU-Tot (ranked 2nd) but it is of lesser influence on TUF (ranked 7th). The location of the campus near home has the greatest influence on MU-Tot students (ranked 1st) and MUF (ranked 2nd) but is of lesser influence on TUF (ranked 8th). The factor "good social life reputation" is ranked the 8th and the 9th most influential factor on MUF and TUF respectively, the MU-Tot ranked this factor as the 22nd.

Among USF students, the **academic reputation** of an institution is perceived by the majority of metropolitan university students as using cutting edge technology, utilizing technology in classrooms, and having a quality library on campus. The "new technology trend needs to be examined further at different types of institutions.

College administrators, recruiters, advancement officers, and strategic planners need to consider these difference in planing, policy formation, and decision making Processes. If there is any need for comparing a university with others, a metropolitan university should be compared with a similar metropolitan university using metropolitan criteria and rates, not with traditional universities using traditional factors.

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